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ABSTRACT

The Student Success Program (SSP) at Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology, in Ontario (Canada), combines institutional research, intervention strategies, and evaluation to form an effective model of student retention. The institutional research component is managed by the Retention Information System (RIS), which collects demographic, withdrawal, performance, and tracking data from the mainframe student information system. Intervention strategies focus on academic and social orientation of new and existing students, assessment of students early in the first semester, peer tutoring and support groups, learning strategy seminars, and the creation of offices of Special Needs and Student Success. Intervention strategies are evaluated by comparing retention rates in programs by semester and comparing retention outcomes for programs with strategies and those without. The SSP is unique in that it has developed from grass-roots efforts in the college and was not mandated by senior administration. It arose from a pilot project to analyze outcomes in high attrition areas in the fall of 1987, and the subsequent formation of a consultative team for student success. Currently, it operates out of the Office of Student Success, which maintains a full-time coordinator, part-time statistician, and part-time research assistant. Over the past 3 years, the SSP has raised awareness of student success issues at the college, continued to develop the RIS, and significantly reduced attrition in at least six program areas. (BCY)

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Mohawk College

Mohawk College of Applied Arts & Technology

Student Success Program

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a) Description of the Institution:

Mohawk College has grown to be one of the great Canadian community colleges. It began with the establishment of the Provincial Institute of Textiles (PIT) in 1947, which in turn became the Hamilton Institute of Technology (HIT) in 1957. Ten years later, in 1967, the HIT was incorporated as the newly established Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology.

Mohawk operates more than twenty campuses and education centres across the Hamilton-Wentworth region, Brant and Haldimand counties, serving a population of half a million people. There are approximately 14,500 full time students (including post-secondary, skills training, apprenticeship, and retraining) and 65,000 continuing education registrations in the present academic year.

There are roughly 7,500 full time post-secondary students enrolled in over forty-five academic programs in the faculties of Applied Arts and Health Care, Business and Communications and Engineering and Health Technology.

b) Description of the Retention Program:

Our Student Success Program consists of three major areas of activity that together form a simple yet effective model. These areas include **institutional research, intervention strategies, and evaluation.**

Institutional Research - The Retention Information System (RIS):

Our retention information system consists of demographic, withdrawal, performance, and tracking data. Each first-year student completes a demographic survey their first day of classes. All students who withdraw from the college go through an exit interview with a counsellor and are asked to complete a withdrawal survey. Performance and tracking data are "downloaded" from our mainframe student information system.

We then correlate performance factors with various demographic variables (i.e., age, sex, high school background, attitude etc.,). This provides academic programs with rich insights into what factors may be most significantly affecting student success. The system can be queried any time and reports can be produced at the program, faculty, or college level.

Intervention Strategies:

Many strategies have been set up at the college over the past three years including an increased focus on:

- the recruitment and selection of students
- academic and social orientation of both new and existing students
- a student attendance policy in the faculty of Engineering and Health Technology
- assessing students early in the first semester to identify "high risk" students (we are using the Noel/Levitz College Student Inventory in over twenty-five academic programs)
- peer tutoring
- mature student support groups
- learning strategy seminars to address the study skill deficiencies of first year students
- a restructuring of our curriculum and programs of study to meet the changing needs of our clientele
- the creation of an Office of Special Needs to help facilitate the success of students with special needs
- the creation of an Office for Student Success to help initiate, promote, support and co-ordinate institutional research and student success strategies across the

college

- the creation of a Consultative Team for Student Success made up of a dynamic group of faculty, support staff, and administrators whose task is to set priorities for the Student Success Program and the Office for Student Success

Evaluation:

Measures to assess the value of our interventions include comparing retention in a specific program from first to second semester or from first to third semester from one year to the next. Another measure is to compare the increase in retention for the same period in those programs who have set up strategies as compared to those programs that have not.

The simple yet comprehensive approach of our Student Success Program has enabled us to significantly reduce attrition in over a dozen academic programs (15-20% on average) and establish Mohawk College as an innovative leader in Student Success in the Ontario college system.

c) Development of the Program:

A pilot project was launched in the Fall of 1987 (through the Counselling Department) with the specific objective of collecting and analyzing demographic, withdrawal, and performance data in three high attrition areas (Electrotechnology, Physical Sciences, and Medical Laboratory Technology). This data proved to be useful and in the Fall of 1988 the collection of data was extended to include all post-secondary programs at the college.

In January of 1989 the Consultative Team for Student Success was formed to provide input and direction to the project from across the college. The first priority of the "C" Team was to lobby the senior administration to hire a full time co-ordinator for the project. This effort proved successful and in the Fall of 1989 the Office for Student Success was created replete

with a full time co-ordinator, part-time statistician, and part-time research assistant.

The co-ordinator for Student Success reports directly to the Vice-President of Student Services (with a matrix to the Vice-President, Academic) and is responsible for chairing the meetings of the Consultative Team for Student Success. Funding for the program is provided internally through the college's "Major Projects" fund.

Our program is unique in that most of our initiatives have developed from the grass roots of the college and have not been mandated by the senior administration. Significant among these is the idea of the Consultative Team for Student Success.

This voluntary group of faculty, support staff and administrators from all levels and divisions across the college **focus on the success of the students first** and what is required to support that success. It is in large part due to the inspired efforts of this group that we have a comprehensive student success program today.

d) Specific Goals and Objectives of the Retention Program

In the Spring of 1990, the Consultative Team for Student Success set the following major objectives for the Program:

1. Increase awareness across the college of student success issues by initiating, promoting, supporting, and co-ordinating student success initiatives.
2. Create a Retention Information System (RIS) that will include demographic, withdrawal, performance, and tracking data that will be accessible by all post-secondary programs to generate meaningful reports at a program, faculty, and college level.
3. Contribute to the significant reduction in student attrition (five percent or greater) in all high attrition post-secondary programs at the college. High attrition programs are defined as those programs that have attrition rates higher than the college average.

e) Results and Outcomes for Students and the Institution

In a recent meeting of the Consultative team (March, 1992) we reviewed our stated objectives and agreed that we had successfully achieved all of our objectives. In particular we noted the following results:

1. **Awareness for student success issues and focus on them have increased greatly over the past three years.** Through many of the increased activities mentioned, the adoption of increased student retention within the college mission statement, and the co-ordination and publication of these many activities by the student success office (see "Activity Update" attached) the general awareness of these issues is now widespread across the college.

2. **The continuing development of a rich and useful Retention Information System (RIS) has been most successful.** We are now generating more than 250 reports annually from our RIS. These reports range in length from one to seventy-five or more pages and are being provided to faculty co-ordinators, academic chairs, student service managers and directors, academic deans, vice-presidents, and the president. Our RIS is the envy of other colleges in Ontario. We are presently preparing a proposal to ACCATO (Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario) to construct a standard Retention Information System for all twenty-three colleges in the Ontario system.

3. **We have significantly reduced attrition in at least six program areas/clusters representing eighteen individual academic programs (see Charts #1 and #2) over the past three years.** This includes the Electrotechnology cluster (six programs), the Physical Sciences cluster (three programs), Common Business (Brant), Recreation

Leadership, Architecture/Civil/Transportation cluster (six programs) and Business Administration. In the present academic year we are solidifying these gains in addition to making significant reductions in attrition in two or three new program areas.

Chart #1

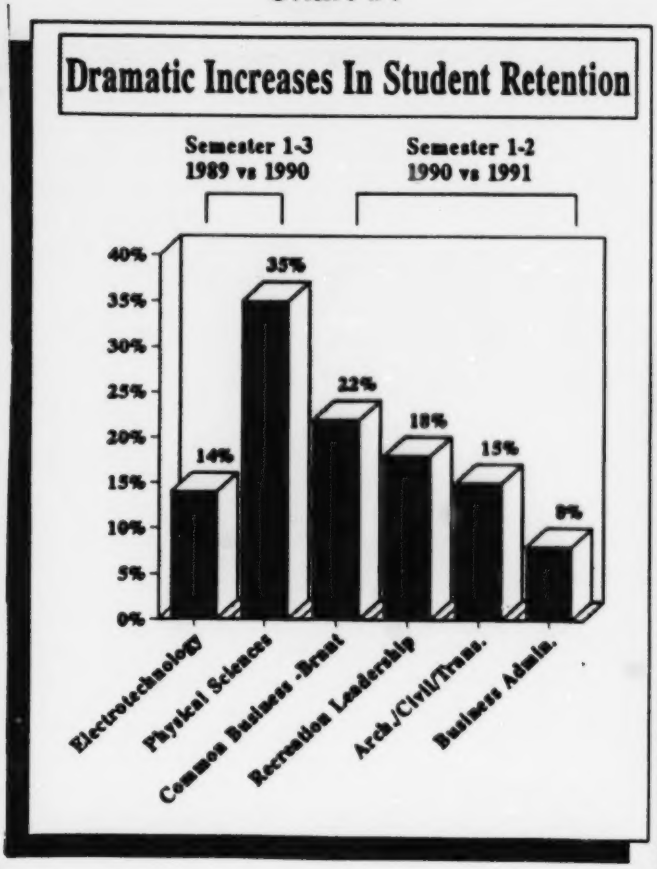
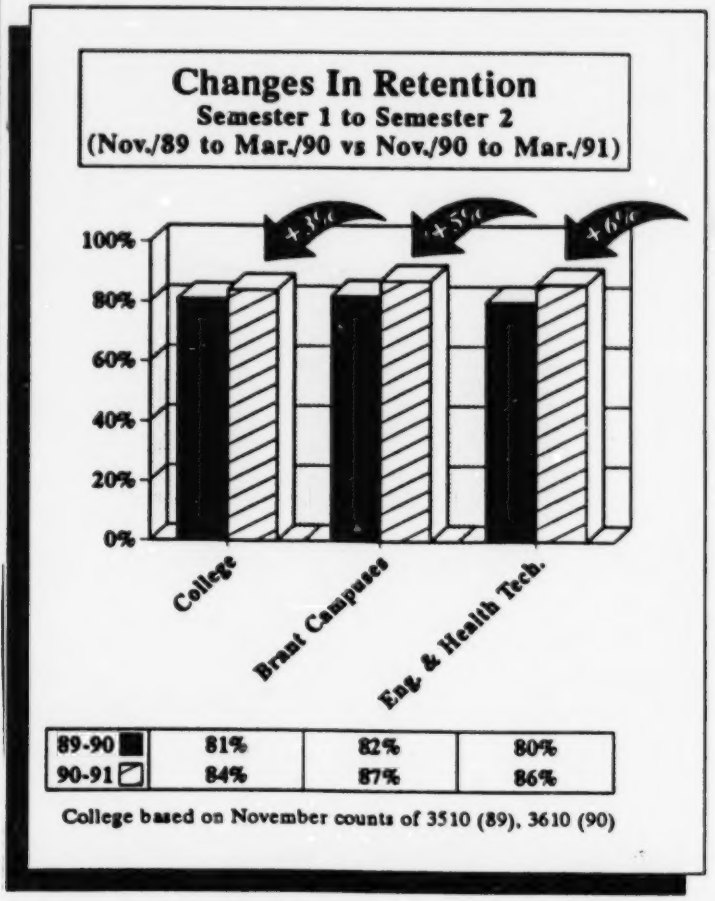


Chart #2



f) Potential for Adaption by Other Institutions:

We feel that there is excellent potential for other colleges to adapt our model. Every college no doubt uses various strategies to enhance student retention in their programs. Where many colleges are weak however is in the area of student research and /or evaluation of their strategies. It is not difficult to begin collecting basic demographic or withdrawal data about your students as the technology for doing this has existed for some time. The will to begin this task and the knowledge of a system for carrying it out are the essential items required.

Evaluating the value of your strategies is also important. If you are going to justify the continued use of a specific strategy or set of strategies, it makes sense to quantify the gains made in an objective fashion. Again, the will to begin this task and the knowledge of how others have achieved these measures are all that is required. As noted earlier, having a co-ordinator for our retention activities and a strong and representative consultative team or committee from across the college has proved invaluable in our experience.